# A CRISIS IN OLDENDORF.

BY DAVID SKAATS FOSTER.

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PART I.

It was about 7 o'clock in the evening of a day in the latter part of May in the present year. I was wandering about in a lazy sort of manner through the narrow, irregular streets of an old German town, which I had reached on an extensive bicycle tour. I meant to lose myself, and I had done so. The surroundings were totally strange and unfamiliar to me, and I had no definite idea of the way I had come or of the direction I must take to return to my lodgings.

The town was Oldendorf, a place of twenty or twenty-five thousand inhabitants. It did not belie its name, either, for a more antiquated, venerable, mediaeval rookery I had never, in all my experience, seen. Oldendorf, as every one knows, or should know, is the most important town or city in the small German principally of Andel Schwartzburg. Every one knows, or should know, also, that Oldendorf is, and always has been, the hereditary seat or residence of the rulers of Andel Schwartzburg—the princely family of Andel-Sachs, the living and reigning representative of which, at the present moment, is his serene highness, Prince Ernest Otto von Andel.

There was also a princess, her Highness Stephanie von Andel, the niece of Ernest. I had seen them both, a few days before, upon some state occasion, in the state coach, but it was at a distance, and I had only been able to note that the prince was stout and elderly and glum, and that the princess was young and fresh and lively.

The evening was gusty, but the air was mild, and now and then there came a sprinkling of rain, for which I did not care, as I had enveloped myself in a worn and picturesque cloak which bad weather could not harm. Several of the streets through which I passed seemed almost deserted. Here there were rows of empty warehouses, with broken windows and decayed timbers; here a great house with the roof half fallen in, standing in an acre of ground which had run to weeds; there a row of untenanted dwellings, with curious gabled fronts and upper stories projecting over the street—houses that must have been built before the thirty years' war.

History says that at one time, in the fifteenth century, I think it was, Oldendorf contained a population of sixty thousand. I could well believe it when I saw so many deserted shops and houses. With the decrease in population, however, there has come no change in the manners or customs of the people or in the general appearance of the streets or buildings. They are a conservative set in Oldendorf, and I think that if Gustavus Adolphus should come marching through the city today, as he did in 1632, he would recognize the place and the people at once without any trouble.

I had set out upon this night in question with the spirit of adventure rife within me. I was like a boy in a story book, who wanders out to seek his fortune, or like the knight of old who journeyed forth in quest of daring deeds. There was something in the romance of the strange, quaint old town which made me feel as if I would like something to happen which was quite out of the ordinary. There was something in the gusty air of the spring night which roused my blood as if it smote me on the cheek.

I felt as did Don Quixote, when he and Sancho found the carless boat, moored to the shores of the river Ebro. If I had found such a boat on this night, when I was strolling through the city of Oldendorf, I would, like him, have stepped into it, and, casting off the moorings, floated down to the enchanted castle to find the beautiful and persecuted princess.

Presently I seemed to have come upon a street which was on the outskirts of the city. Upon one side the houses were few and far between, and what houses there were seemed to be uninhabited. Upon the other side there was nothing but a wall; a wall some two or three hundred feet in length, and twelve or fifteen feet in height. I crossed over to this wall and walked along beside it and saw that the top was indented throughout its entire length with embrasures, and that, every fifty feet or so, there arose from it a small round turret. The wall was almost covered with ivy and was full of holes and cracks, so that I thought it must have existed for centuries.

It did not stand flush with the street, but about fifteen feet back from it. This space of fifteen feet was filled by a sort of ditch, or gully, half choked with weeds and stones, and was separated from the street proper by an iron picket fence about three feet high.

I walked along this iron fence for some distance, until I came to a place where it turned in at right angles and ended at the wall. Here there was a wooden bridge over the ditch, which led to a small but solid looking door, beyond which the fence was continued the same as before.

Having nothing better to do, I passed over the bridge and stood before the door in the old wall. It was strongly built of oak, and was hung with great, curiously wrought iron hinges, worked into many a scroll and eaf and flower; but that which interested me most was a motto engraved upon the stone cap above the portal, which read as follows: "Who enters here leaves nope behind."

Of course, the inscription was not in English, but in old German text, and I could give it here in the original, as I am a perfect master of the German language, as also of several other tongues; but I think that such exhibitions of erudition are not pertinent to the story, and, to say the least, are out of taste.

In my adventurous spirit there was something about this door and the inscription over it which met my views exactly. Evidently I needed not to seek further. There was a whole world of possibilities behind that door. It might well be that, behind it, I should find the lovely and suffering princess, of whom I was in search. When one comes to think of it it is always through a door that one goes to his fate. By entering some door a man takes the first step by which he becomes a drunkard or gambler. By entering another he meets the woman whom he is to love. Through one doorway he enters upon a career of fame; through another that of ignominy. Should I, or should I not, pass through that fateful portal? I little thought then that the question was to be solved, not by myself, but by circumstances over which I had no control; that I should enter the doorway without intending to do so, and in a perfectly involuntary manner.

While I was engaged in these reflections I heard a crackling of twigs and rustling of leaves, as though made by footsteps, and, looking up, I saw a man coming toward me along the wall inside the iron fence. He was approaching from a direction opposite to that whence I myself had arrived, walking upon a narrow path between the masonry and the ditch, and it seemed to me that he must have come around the further corner of the wall, which corner was perhaps sixty feet distant from the bridge and the doorway.

He came up as far as where the fence turned in toward the wall, and stood there, looking at me over the pickets, with a most supercilious and insolent expression. He was a man of forty, I should think; tall and broad and rather heavy about the waist. He had bushy black brows, and small ferret eyes. His underlids were puffy, and a great military mustache with waxed ends but ill-concealed a large and ugly mouth. The expression of his countenance, as he stared at me, seemed malevolent in the extreme. He was doubtless ill-pleased to find me in that particular spot, at that particular time. His dress was of a soldierly cut, though he was not in uniform. He kept one hand in his pocket and, with a riding whip in the other, flicked the dirt from his boots, looking up at me now and then, with a glance which seemed to say: "Why don't you take yourself off? Can't you see that I am waiting for you to go?"

Now, if he had not come, I probably would have left the bridge in a moment or so, and proceeded on my way along the street, as I had, to tell the truth, no real, cold-blooded intention of forcing my way through that door, but when I saw, or thought I saw, that he was so anxious to have me go, I immediately changed my mind, and began to mature plans by which I might remain on that same spot for an indefinite period—days, months if necessary. I also assumed an appearance which indicated my intention. I took on a look of leisure, I made it seem as though time was no object to me. I yawned, took out a cigar and slowly lighted it, and then leaned in a comfortable attitude against the stone frame of the doorway.

He at length lost patience and spoke to me, in a voice which quivered slightly with suppressed eagerness or rage or both: "My good fellow, there are reasons which make your further presence here, just now, rather awkward. I hope you have satisfied your curiosity about the door, and I bid you good evening, and hope you will have a pleasant walk."

He leered at me patronizingly, as he said "my good fellow," and it was really more than I could stand.

"Why, my dear old gentleman," I answered, "I am not in the slightest hurry to go. To tell the truth, I had thought of spending the night here. I do not object to company, however, and you may remain here with me if you wish."

"Young man, I do not wish for your company, and you will do very well without mine. These grounds are private and the property of a very exalted personage. You will do well to take my advice and go at once."

"Your advice," said I, "is without doubt excellent, and I will take it into consideration. I would like to know first whether you speak by authority of this same exalted personage, and whether he knows that you yourself are here."

I had evidently hit the nail on the head this time, for he betrayed some uneasiness and glanced furtively up and down the street. Time pressed him, without doubt,

"Fellow!" he cried, "I will have no loiterers about here."

for he showed a disposition to hasten matters, by beginning to threaten and bluster.

"Fellow!" he cried. "I will have no loiterers about here. Either go at once, or I will take steps to compel you."

"Take your steps at once," said I. "I shall be delighted to see them; but first, had I not better help you over the fence?"

Ever since we commenced to talk his rage had been growing on him, until now his face was purple, the veins stood out on his forehead, and his eyebrows had come together in a malignant scowl. To get at me, he gripped the fence with both hands, raised one foot and set it between the pickets, and lifted himself up, that he might spring over to my side.

Now, the iron pickets of the fence rose six or seven inches above the rail; they were about four or five inches apart, and, at their tops, were wrought to the shape of arrow heads, with good-sized barbs projecting downward and sideways. He had placed his foot between two of these pickets, and, in preparing to step down on my side, he suddenly lost his balance and fell sprawling at my very feet.

This wasn't the worst of his misfortune, either, for his boot had slipped backward as he fell, and his ankle had gone down past the barbs and had become inextricably fastened between the pickets, just as if he were in the stocks.

He tumbled about on the floor of the bridge and raved and swore in the most artistic way—after the manner of Germans—he tried to raise himself up like a cat—he pulled this way and that—he tugged like a bull—he fumed and frothed, but it was all of no use. The fence had been made by a good, honest blacksmith, and

There sounded a tittering or giggling.

held him fast. Several articles came out of his pockets during his struggles: a pocketknife, a memorandum book, a snuff box, and one or two other small things. I picked them up, meaning to hand them to him when he should become more composed, but, just then, his coat came down over his head, and he presented altogether such a ridiculous, outrageous spectacle that I laughed till my sides ached.

And now comes a very curious thing. During my merriment I had incautiously approached too near this chained wild beast, for he suddenly reached out and caught my ankle with a ferocious grip. I exerted all the strength I was capable of and wrenched myself loose, but, in doing so, I lost my balance and hurled myself like a stone from a catapult against the door in the old wall.

Have you ever seen Harlequin in Humpty Dumpty dive headlong through the partition? Well, that is exactly what I did at that moment. I felt myself strike the door and the next instant I was in utter darkness, sprawling at full length on what seemed to be a stone pavement. As I was shot through it seemed to me that a light flashed and disappeared, but I thought that I might perhaps be mistaken. I rose and sought for the door and found it. I felt a great, heavy latch, and tried it, but the door was immovable. It was evidently hung with a strong spring and fastened with a spring lock. It was ajar when I struck it; it had opened to admit me, and had immediately closed again and made me captive. Just at that moment, out of the darkness, close beside me, there sounded a tittering or giggling, such as young maidens give utterance to on almost all occasions, and a voice of very sweet and pleasant timber spoke to me:

"You came in here very quickly, sir. I hope you did not harm yourself."

"Oh, no; not in the least," said I. "In fact, I always enter a door in that manner. To tell the truth, I prefer it."

"Well, then, there is no harm done," said the voice, "excepting that you have put out my candle by opening and shutting the door so swiftly; but I suppose we can find our way very well in the dark, so come along, for the princess is waiting for you."

PART II.

"Ah, ha!" said I to myself, while my heart beat a little faster than its wont. "Here is the princess, after all. Adventures come to him who seek them, and the age of enchantments is not past by a good deal. Now, an ordinary young man might say to himself: 'It is not you whom this princess is expecting, but Count von So-and-so, or Baron Something Else; and if you take the place of the expected visitor, you will be thrown out for your pains.' But I shall not be governed by any such low and servile considerations. John Wentworth Jenkins of New York, U. S. A., shall be as good as any count or baron of them all; so here goes. All I have to do is to see this princess, who doubtless needs my services, let her have her own way about everything, and contradict her not, keep up a good nerve, and take everything for granted."

These reflections were made in the twinkling of an eye. "I shall not keep her highness waiting long," I answered my attendant. "But, as I am somewhat unused to this passage, will you kindly reach me your hand, and I will follow you at once."

"Here it is, then," said the voice, and I felt about me in the pitch darkness of the place and caught hold of a soft, warm little palm, not so small, either, but a good

And so we set forward to find the princess.

hand to get tight hold of and to squeeze a little, if necessary; and so we set forward to find the princess.

We went about forty steps and came to a door, which my guide opened. We then seemed to be in a sort of long corridor or passage, with a low vaulted stone roof. Some small amount of light streamed through the cracks of a doorway at the further end, by aid of which I could make these observations. I suppose I could have got along now without help, but I still kept hold of the hand, and perhaps pressed a little tighter. I could also note an answering pressure now and then.

We ascended four or five steps to reach this further door, and opening it, we found ourselves in a large chamber. This apartment had several windows, but the dusk had come, so that the light was still imperfect. I could now, however, note the appearance of my companion. She was a pretty girl of about eighteen or nineteen years of age, with a trim form, long braids of blonde hair and a retrousse nose. She snatched her hand away from me and went on ahead through another door, casting back at me, as she went, a look of pertness and coquetry.

The next room we entered was lighted by candelabra, as, in fact, were all of the further apartments through which she took me; and so we went on, up and down stairways, through corridors and suites of apartments, and large salons, till I thought there was no end to it; and all this time I had not seen a soul beside the girl with the turned-up nose. As we proceeded, the furnishings and decorations became more elegant. One large salon was hung around with dingy life-sized portraits of bewigged and powdered old dignitaries and soldiers; another seemed ghostly and fearsome with suits of armor and old spears and swords and blunderbusses and banners.

At last we entered a suite of chambers in which the belongings seemed more tasteful and more feminine. "Here," said I to myself, "is where I meet the princess;" and I was not mistaken. The apartment into which I now followed Melanie, for that was the girl's name, as I afterward discovered, was small and cozy; it was hung and furnished in soft blue and garret, and was absolutely full of exquisite pictures and ornaments and objects of luxury. In the center of the room was a small table with a cover laid upon it for two, with linen of dazzling whiteness, and a profusion of silver utensils of quaint and antique pattern.

Melanie motioned me to wait where I was, and going to a small archway which communicated with another chamber, said, in a respectful tone, to some one there:

"He is here, your highness."

I had removed my cloak and made quite a presentable appearance in the blouse and knickerbockers of my bicycle costume. It was picturesque, if not conventional. In a moment or two there sounded the rustling of silk and of dainty lingerie, and a lady of great beauty stood before us.

She was young, not over twenty years of age at most, and she was rather tall, and her figure, though somewhat slender, was graceful and rounded in its outlines. In striking contrast were the wavy masses of her dark brown hair, the limpid gray of her eyes and the soft whiteness of her skin. Her face was oval, her features small and perfect. She was in evening dress, and her arms and neck and shoulders were like the marble of a statue. She was somewhat haughty in her manner, and there seemed to be an air of melancholy in her face, which was apparent even when she smiled, as she did now.

She acted for a moment as if irresolute or hesitating, and then gave me her hand and said:

"My dear baron, you did well to come at once."

I bent low and pressed my mustache against the coral tips of her small fingers and answered:

"You would have seen me sooner, your highness, could I have managed it."

She took her hand away from me before I was half through with it.

"Herr baron, do you know that you are most imprudent?"

"I have been thinking the same thing, your highness, for the last five minutes."

"It was expressly understood that you were not to come before dark, and your carriage drove up half an hour ago in open daylight, and took up a position among the shrubbery of the park, where every one with half an eye could see it. You are certainly not yourself tonight, herr baron."

"Your highness is right, as usual," I murmured, submissively.

"When I gave my word I did not intend that the affair should be advertised as you seem to wish it. One would think that you never planned an elopement before, or, perhaps, it is an everyday matter for you to run away with a princess?"

"I can assure your highness that it is not," I answered, for I had made up my mind that, no matter what, I would adhere strictly to the truth.

"I thought that your conduct needed a reprimand, and for that reason, and also because I wished to make certain further stipulations as to the program I had Melanie send word to you in your carriage by one of the grooms that you should come to me at once by the postern door in the Burgerschlact wall. I hope that now you understand matters fully."

If I had said that I understood anything at all about it I would have lied, so I was silent.

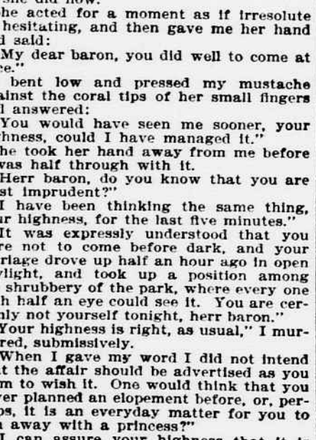
"I also thought," she continued, "that you might not object to some slight repast with me before we start; so, pray be seated and I will defer my injunctions until afterward."

So saying, the princess glided into one of the chairs at the small supper table and I, nothing loth, sat down opposite her. She touched a bell and Melanie stole noiselessly into the room and prepared to attend us.

Now, those of my readers who have enjoyed a petit souper en fete-a-tete with a real flesh and blood princess, at the same time beautiful and young, and only those can imagine my feelings on this occasion.

The reader naturally asks what does all this thing mean? I think that the question is a very proper one. In fact, it is the very question which I put to myself, as I sat down to table with the princess. I stated the case to myself as follows:

This lady has arranged to elope with a certain baron, whose name I have not yet



"You are certainly not yourself tonight, Herr Baron."

discovered. She imagines, or pretends to imagine, that I am the baron—memorandum, to ascertain, as soon as possible, my name. As she takes me for the baron, she, of course, has never seen him. How could she arrange to fly with a man she had never seen? Two answers to the enigma immediately suggest themselves: First, the whole thing is a hoax, of which your humble servant is the dupe; second, the princess has wheels in her head. These seemed to me at the time the only possible explanations, but, to anticipate the denouement, I afterward found that neither was correct.

Just at this moment the thought occurred to me that the real baron, the man whom the princess intended to fly with, was no other than my friend in the stocks. He had been instructed, while waiting in his carriage, to go around and enter the postern door in the Burgerschlact wall, and he was obeying the commands of his high-born lady love, when he met me. He was, without doubt, still groveling on the floor of the bridge, with his heel fast between the fence pickets, while I was taking his place beside the fair inamorata. What a turn of the wheel of fortune! The thought of the contrast was too much for my equanimity, and I shook with half-repressed merriment.

The princess looked up at me and spoke rather sharply:

"What are you laughing at, sir?"

I described the whole occurrence as perfectly as I could, taking care to suppress mention of the spot where it had happened. I perhaps added to the narrative certain unimportant innovations of my own. It could do no harm, and they certainly made the story more interesting. Her highness was good enough to be immensely amused by my description. She laughed merrily at it several times, her melancholy air disappeared little by little, and I thought that I began to gain some headway in making her acquaintance. To tell the truth, I was getting to be extravagantly jealous of the man, and it gave me exquisite pleasure to put another spoke in his wheel and to make the princess laugh at the baron, even though she did not know she was laughing at him.

PART III.

Some of my readers will doubtless wonder what we talked about all the time that we were at supper. This is a very natural question, considering that I had never seen her before, and that she had never seen me before, that she thought that I was some one else, and that I knew that she thought so. I was, of course, anxious not to show my ignorance of matters of which the baron would be supposed cognizant, and I therefore confined myself to letting her know that I thought her charming. I did not tell her so in so many words, either, but strained my ingenuity to the utmost, to see how many times and in how many ways I could express it to her without exactly saying it; and I think that I discovered at least fifty such ways. Flattery, if given with delicacy and discretion, has always pleased and will always please pretty women, and I think that I did not suffer in her opinion by the use which I made of it.

She, on her part, occupied considerable time in explaining to me the relationship which existed between the Andels and the Hohenzollerns; they both being descended from a common stock. It is needless to say that I could not dispute her conclusions in the matter, even if I had wished to. To support her position, she read extracts from the Almanach de Gotha, a copy of which work she caused Melanie to bring her. I thought to myself, "Here is where I find out who I am."

"Your highness will pardon me," said I. "The authorities which you have quoted from the Almanach are without doubt correct. I wish to call your attention, however, to the fact that of late years many inaccuracies have found their way into this book. To illustrate what I mean, will you have the kindness to turn to that page of the volume which contains my name?" She turned over the leaves and presently said:

"Here it is: 'Pilsener,' 'Johann Wolfgang,' 'Wilhelm Augustus.' No, it must be further down. Ah, I have it now. 'Ludwig von Pilsener, born 1856.'"

"Look at that," I exclaimed. "Do I look as if I were born in 1856?"

"You certainly do not seem anywhere near that age," she answered, with a critical look over my person.

"I should think not," said I, with some warmth. "I was born in 1866, and I naturally object to having ten years added to my age by a careless typesetter. That is what I meant by the errors in the Almanach de Gotha."

When we had come to the coffee, and Melanie had retired, the princess leaned back in her chair, looked at me intently for a moment, and said:

"Well?"

"Well?" said I.

"Have you brought it with you?" said she.

Now, as I said before, I had made up my mind to stick to the truth, and therefore I could not say I had brought it with me; if

She poured several drops of some colorless fluid into one of the glasses.

I had said I had not brought it, she might not be pleased. I therefore chose a middle course and answered:

"I have not brought it with me, your highness, but I can promise that it will be forthcoming without fail at the proper moment."

The princess bit her lip and seemed somewhat vexed.

"I see, Herr Baron, that you are as much a diplomat as ever."

"I was never more of a diplomat than now, your highness," I answered, with a gallant bow.

"At all events," said she, "you must have it with you at St. Estephe, or I do not marry you. The agreement was that it was to be handed to the mayor before the ceremony, to be by him given to me immediately afterward."

"The exact terms," said I, at the same time wondering what was this mysterious something upon which she set so much store, and which played such an important part that nothing could go on without it.

"And now," she continued, "as to the other conditions. You must recollect that most of our negotiations have been conducted by the means of your secretary or emissary, Jarno; that I have never talked to you except at the masked ball a week ago, and that I have never really seen your face till now. I thought, therefore, that this was the proper occasion for asserting my wishes in the matter."

"Your wishes shall be law, your highness."

"In the first place, you are to drive me tonight across the frontier, to St. Estephe. The distance, I suppose, is about ten miles?"

"More or less, your highness."

"You are to take me immediately to the Maitre D'Armes, and, leaving me at the door, you are to put up elsewhere. The marriage ceremony is to be performed by the mayor of St. Estephe at 9 o'clock tomorrow morning. Can I trust you to do as I wish?"

"Your highness," said I, placing my hand upon my heart, "I will be your devoted servant in all things." And I spoke truly in all things, for I had taken a great fancy to her, and I felt that there was nothing I would not do to serve her.

"The world may condemn me for making a runaway match, but your conditions were marriage or nothing, and, as we couldn't be married here, there was nothing for it but to elope. It will be considered, of course, as morganatic, of that you are aware. There is nothing further to be said. I will take a glass of wine with you, and then we will start."

Saying this, the princess arose and stepped to a cabinet in that part of the room that was back of me. I heard the tinkle of glass, and, happening to turn my eyes toward a small Venetian mirror on the wall at my left, I saw that it reflected her every movement, and that I could watch her without being conscious of it.

She had filled two wine glasses from a decanter, and now, with the utmost surprise, I distinctly saw her produce from her corsage a tiny silver-mounted phial, from which she poured several drops of some colorless fluid into one of the glasses.

"The baron is a lucky man, after all," said I to myself.

The thought of Lucretia Borgia came to my mind as I watched the reflection of the princess in the mirror. As she stood in front of the cabinet, her profile only was visible, but in that way the perfection of her lithe figure was most apparent. This, the somber loveliness of her features, the contour of her neck and shapely head and her attitude and gestures formed a most beautiful picture, which her occupation gave an intensely tragic interest.

She seemed to pause, to hesitate for an instant; she looked toward me, and passed her hands before her eyes; then she seemed to form a sudden resolution. She took the glass into which she had poured the drug and dashed its contents over the floor, filled it again with wine, and came around and handed it to me.

I arose and bowed to her, and saying: "To your happiness," I drank the sparkling contents at one swallow. Then as I put down the glass I remarked: "I fear there is poison in it; but if there is it is too late."

"Poison!" she exclaimed. "What do you mean?" and the soft whiteness of her face became crimson.

"The poison of your glance," I said. "The reflection of your eyes in the wine, which no man can brave unharmed."

She looked at me for a moment with a curious, questioning glance, and then smiled in a bold, daring way.

"I am ready now, Herr Baron, to run away with you; that is to say, if you still adhere to your resolution. I have only to change my gown to a traveling suit, and I will be with you. Wait for me here."

Saying this, she swept out of the room, giving me a backward look over her shoulder as she passed through the door, in which there seemed to be a mixture of archness and of malice.

Left to myself, I, of course, tried to think the affair out, but, as may be readily imagined, I found it a very serious problem. When I was first introduced into the presence of the princess I thought, as I before remarked, that the whole matter was a joke. It was in this way that I justified

The sudden start upset me.

myself for permitting the lady to take me for the baron. If I was the subject of a hoax, I was certainly right in entering into the spirit of the thing and thus making the scheme recoil in some measure upon the heads of its inventors. I thought of Bakbarah, the barber's second brother in the "Arabian Nights;" the youth who was enticed by the old woman into the palace of the grand vizier, where he was at first petted and bamboozled, then buffeted and pinched by the beautiful lady and her slaves. In the words of the barber, "He knew not, poor fellow, that the ladies of our great and powerful lords amuse themselves by making such fun as this with any young man who is silly enough to thrust himself into their hands." The case of the barber's brother and myself seemed analogous, and it occurred to me that I was certainly at liberty to humor my eccentric hostess, and that it behooved me, at the same time, to be upon my guard, lest I should be overtaken with misfortunes similar to those of the unlucky Bakbarah.

I had now been with the princess for an hour, and her manner, her words and her actions had operated a complete change in my ideas. I no longer thought that my reception was a huge joke. I saw that she was serious and in earnest, and I reasoned it out in my mind something in this fashion: That the princess had been in some way indiscreet, that the scoundrel of a baron had got some hold upon her, and that, through threats or undue pressure, the unfortunate and lovely creature had been induced to make a runaway match with him. There was only one flaw in my chain of reasoning; she had never seen him, it is true, but she had talked with him at the masked ball. How was it that, after hearing my voice, she could still suppose me to be the baron?

I blessed the luck which had brought me to the door in the Burgerschlact wall before him, and I resolved that it was my duty to aid her in every way in my power, and never to leave her side till she was free from his machinations. The best procedure, as it seemed to me, was to humor her present design of eloping. I would thus be in the very heart of the business and could strike a blow at the proper time. In fact, I saw no other way of remaining with her at all. Thus, instead of engaging, as I thought, in a wild and light-hearted frolic, I found myself plunged all at once into the vortex of an exciting and fantastic tragedy.

In the incredibly short space of fifteen minutes the princess reappeared, accompanied by Melanie. She had changed her evening gown to a very chic and dainty traveling suit, with a somewhat short skirt, a tight-fitting jacket and a soft gray felt hat with a feather in the side. Melanie was also attired in traveling costume, and carried a small handbag and several wraps. I was very much surprised at this.

"Is Melanie going with us?" I exclaimed.

"Certainly, Herr Baron, did you suppose for an instant that I would go without her? And, besides, you know that that was part of the agreement."

"Oh, of course," said I, with as good a grace as possible. "You must pardon me for not thinking of it, but, as you yourself remarked, I am not exactly myself tonight."

I wondered at the same time what other agreements that confounded Baron Ludwig von Pilsener had made for me. Melanie was a trim and pretty girl, to be sure. At least I had thought so before seeing the princess, but running away with two women was not the same as running away with one, by a good deal. It took away a great part of the romance of the thing, and I would not have the same opportunities for protecting the princess as I would were she to be alone. It also occurred to me, for obvious reasons, to wonder whether the baron's carriage had seats in the inside for more than two persons, and what disposition we should make of Melanie in case it did not. I was willing to submit to the inconvenience of riding three on a seat, at least, with my present two companions, but I drew the line when it came to sitting on the box with the driver.

"Well," said the princess, "we are ready, and the quicker we go now the better. I forgot to tell you that after I sent for

"It's the baron's house, of course."

you I also got word to your coachman to leave the conspicuous place in which he was posted and to drive around into the small street or lane which is immediately under my apartments. It is very dark there, and nobody will see us go. I doubt whether your own coachman will be able to recognize you."

"It is all one to me if he does not," said I.

With that we started, Melanie going first, her mistress next and I bringing up the rear. We passed through the door opposite to that which I had first entered, then through two or three apartments, went down a staircase, turned a corner, went through a corridor, down another narrow staircase and arrived at the street door. Melanie opened it with a key which she had brought with her and we passed out and found ourselves upon the street. That is to say, I supposed it to be the street, but it was really so dark that I couldn't have sworn to it.

The indistinct outlines of a close carriage appeared near by out of the darkness. We advanced toward it, and as we did so the driver dismounted and opened the door for us. It was raining quite steadily now, and the night was so black that I could not distinguish the coachman's features. I was also positive that he could not tell me from the baron. I handed the princess in and was about to do the same by the girl.

"Melanie!" spoke the princess from the depths of the coach, "I have forgotten an umbrella. Run in and get one."

Melanie turned and darted up the steps.

"And you, Herr Baron, why do you not come in out of the rain? If you are dripping wet, what is to become of us, who must travel with you?"

I did not make any difficulty about the matter, but got in at once. It was as I had feared: the carriage had but one seat. I was still standing and revolving the matter in my mind, when, suddenly, the question was settled for me by the driver, who, as soon as he saw me step inside, slammed the door to, leaped upon the box, whipped the horses and drove away at a furious pace. The sudden start upset me and seated me forcibly beside the princess.

PART IV.

Now, the seat was rather narrow for two persons, so that I was brought much closer to her than I would have presumed to get under other circumstances. The touch of her shoulder against mine and the wafting of some soft stray locks of hair across my face, as the jolting of the carriage brought us together, had a delightful charm for me, and I felt that I would like to have it go on forever. It could not be, however, and I reached up to pull down the sash that I might stop the coachman. The sash would not come down. I tried the one on her side. It was alike immovable. "Your highness," said I, "the windows will not open. Shall I break the glass and make that idiot of a coachman stop?"

"It is immaterial to me," she answered, "whether you break it or not; excepting that, if you do break it, I will get wet, which I should not like. You do not wish Melanie to go with us, and perhaps it is just as well."

"But, your highness," I protested, "you must not think that it is by my orders that that dolt of a driver has gone off without her. He shall return for her, if you wish it. I shall discharge him this minute, if it pleases you."

"I can take care of myself very well alone, and so you will find, Herr Baron. Let it go as it is."

There was nothing more to be said, and I was secretly pleased at the outcome of it.

There was also the romance of the thing to be considered. Running away with the princess was something daring and piquant, but with two women, there would be a good deal of the wholesale element, and it would resemble too much the rape of the Sabines.

Now, all this time I was sitting squeezed up as far as possible in my own corner of the vehicle, that I might give my fair companion as much room as possible. I am naturally very respectful toward women. I might even call myself chivalrous; in fact, I have very nice notions on the subject. The idea, therefore, never occurred to me to take advantage of the opportunity and become in any way familiar or obtrusive. There was something also in this lady's rank, her manner, and the serious purity of her loveliness, which would have forbidden the advances of the rankest churl.

Feeling this way, therefore, toward the princess, I was the more surprised that

"If you touch me I'll kill you."

she did not seem at all to shrink away from me, as I did from her. She seemed rather to edge over, by slow advances, more and more to my side. When the jolting of the coach would throw her somewhat nearer to me, instead of retreating, she would keep the advantage she had gained, until, finally, she was as close to me as she could very well be without absolutely reclining upon my shoulder. More than once, I remember, I was tempted to put my arm around her and bring the sweet being still closer. The temptation was a terrible one, but I resisted it bravely, and I was afterward glad of it.

The driver kept his horses at the same rapid gait as when he started, and we soon passed over what seemed to be a long stone bridge and out of the town. At last I judged we were out of the town, because the lights had disappeared, but it was rather dark and raining still, and the moisture on the glass made it impossible for me to give more than a guess as to our surroundings. At one time we seemed to be climbing a long, steep hill, and now we were plunging down the further side of it; then, again, for a long time, a quarter of an hour at least, the road passed through a dense, black forest. Meanwhile I was wondering whether we were on the road to St. Estephe, what kind of a place it was and whether we would be stopped on the frontier by the customs officials. Von Pilsener had evidently arranged with his coachman to get rid of Melanie, and if he had broken his agreement about taking the maid, he would be very likely to break any other agreement, and take the princess heavens knows where. His man evidently thought that he had the baron inside of the carriage. I could have told him where to find the baron at that moment, and I laughed to myself as I imagined his surprise and discomfiture when he should find he had brought me to St. Estephe instead of his master.

The princess and I did not talk very much during our journey. The creaking and jolting of the vehicle and rumbling of the wheels made it difficult for us to make ourselves heard, and I had besides exhausted all the subjects of conversation, excepting those upon which it was dangerous for me to enter. At one time she asked me if I was quite familiar with St. Estephe.

"I was quite familiar with it, some years ago," I answered, and so I had been, for that was the name of a cheap brand of claret which we fellows had patronized at college.

"I suppose," she continued, "that you know where to find the Maitre D'Armes without any trouble?"

"Oh," said I, "I have left all that to the coachman."

"I noticed, as soon as we started, that you had a way of leaving everything to the coachman, but I do not mind, as long as you keep your agreement about the main thing, the matter about which I spoke to you at the supper table. Remember? It must be produced and handed to the syndic before the ceremony."

"I will do even better than that, your highness. I assure you now, by everything that I hold sacred, that the ceremony shall not take place until I have given it into your own hands. What is the use of making the mayor a party to the transaction? I will give it directly to you, and if I do not, there will be no ceremony."

"You are certainly very generous, Herr Baron. And your present promise is very different from the wording of your previous conditions. I must say that my opinion of you has changed materially since I met you tonight."

"I hope, your highness, that the opinion which you had of me before tonight was not a favorable one."

"It was not, Herr Baron."

In an hour, or it might have been an hour and a quarter, after we first started, we saw several lights appear here and there, and we seemed to be coming into a town. We again passed over a bridge, drove some way along a street and made a number of turns; then we seemed to pass through a stone arch; the wheels grated over a winding graveled driveway, and the carriage drew up in front of a building of goodly size, several windows of which were lighted up.

The driver sprang to the ground and opened the coach door. I stepped down upon the path and handed the princess out. At the same time, the doors of the portico of the building were flung open, the light from the vestibule streamed across the road, and a servant in livery stood upon the threshold.

I gave one look at the driver. He was glaring at me with bulging eyes. He seemed to be paralyzed with astonishment. I took the princess up the steps and consigned her to the lackey.

"Take the lady upstairs," I said, "and see that she wants for nothing. I will be up there myself in a few minutes."

When she had disappeared up the winding staircase with the footman, the driver found his tongue.

"The baron!" he cried, huskily. "I thought you were he."

"Others have also thought so," said I, at the same time slipping a twenty-mark goldpiece into his hand. "I am doing this to oblige the baron. He will be much

I took her in my arms.

pleased when he hears of it. What is this building to which you have brought us? It certainly does not look like a hotel."

"Look like a hotel! Why should it? It's the baron's house, of course."

"Look here," said I; "you need not unharness. Keep the carriage waiting on this spot, as I may want it. Ten more coins like the one I gave you if you do what I wish."

With this I left him and rushed into the house and up the staircase after the princess. I felt that I must get her away with all speed possible. I met the lackey who had shown her up and asked him where he had taken her. He indicated a large reception room at the end of the corridor, and I at once entered and closed the door behind me. The princess was looking out of the window. When she heard my step she turned and confronted me with the look of a caged panther. As I advanced her right hand made a swift movement toward her bosom, and she flashed in my face a bright, narrow-bladed knife.

"Stand away!" she cried. "If you touch me I will kill you!"

The fire flashed from the depths of her great gray eyes. I had thought her beautiful enough before, but now she was magnificent.

I went a step nearer and held my blouse open with both hands, exposing my shirt front to the point of her knife.

"Kill me, then," I said, for I knew well enough that she wouldn't.

She was half ashamed at this, and lowered her weapon and turned away her head; but her emotions got the better of her, and she became furious again. Then she began to talk, and I was careful not to interrupt her, but let her have her say.

"You are a villain," she cried; "a contemptible scoundrel! You have broken your agreement, and your word is worth nothing. Is this the Maitre D'Armes Hotel? Is this St. Estephe? It is neither the one nor the other. It is your own house, or the house of one of your wicked friends. Do not deny it; it would be useless. And I own it to my shame: I was idiot enough to think there was some good in you. Yes, I was such a dolt that I was commencing to like you. Driveling fool that I was to imagine that, because you were a tall, good-looking fellow, the reports which I had heard about you could not be true. My folly is what saved you. Yes, if it were not for that and the fear that, after all, you did not have it on your person, I would have given you such a dose in that glass of wine that you would have slept for twenty-four hours. Again, while we were in the carriage, if you had attempted to take the least liberty with me, if you had given the least sign of such a thing, you would have felt this knife in your vitals. I was waiting for it, even hoping for it; but your cold, satanic cunning and prudence, as usual, saved you. I have risked all, and for what? For nothing; for I do not believe that you even have it with you. Ha! you do not say that you have. Then there is an end of it, and I will tell you something now that will disarrange your plans and show you that you are a fool for all your pains. Learn this—that I am not the princess."

"Learn this, also," said I, "that I am not the baron."

PART V.

"Not the baron!" she exclaimed, with wonder-distended eyes. "Then who in the name of heaven are you?"

"I am an American, and my name is John Wentworth Jenkins. I was the baron simply because you called me so, as I make it a point never to contradict a lady. Since I have told you my name, will you be kind enough to give me yours?"

"There is no reason why I should not do so, sir! I am Hilda von Waldeck, second cousin once removed of the Princess Stephanie. But how was it that you came to me in the baron's place, sir? Did he send you to me?"

"No, Fraulein Waldeck, he did not send me. If I had gone where the baron sent me, I would be very, very far removed from here. The manner of my introduction to your apartments, in the place of the baron, is a wonderfully singular story, and I will be glad enough to tell you all about it when we have more leisure and are in a more proper place for it. You really have no cause of complaint against me. I have obliged you in your every wish. I have

I grasped her arm and pointed across the way.

kept every agreement, and have, throughout, conducted myself toward you in the most respectful manner. Can you ask for more? To be sure, I have humored you in the mistake you made in taking me for Von Pilsener, but I did it because I thought the man was a dirty scoundrel, and it seemed to me that it was the best way to protect you from his machinations and attentions. I came up to find you now, because I had just discovered that the rascal of a driver had brought us to the baron's house instead of to the